

Dickson Mounds: Past, Present, Future

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Leaves are falling; in the distance a giant hill is being built. The scene is one Dickson Mounds State Park uses to teach visitors of early Illinoisans. Through education, the museum preserves over 10,000 years of history. Burial grounds, artifacts, and history combine to educate and preserve the history of Illinois, and more is taught every day. Illinois' history will be preserved for many more years. Due to the founding, excavation, and history of Dickson Mounds State Park, Illinoisans can discover and appreciate the early Native Americans' culture.

The history of Dickson Mounds started over ten thousand years ago when the first Native Americans moved to Illinois. However, the people of the Woodland Era built the first mounds. These mounds served as the first cemeteries in Illinois. Mounds often became mass graves because people only lived for about twenty-four years. As scientists now know, many people died of diseases that were unpreventable at the time. The Woodland people had one of the first well-developed cultures. Some bodies show proof of cremation and wrapping of bodies preserving the bodies. Many mounds show modern practices, such as cemetery-like graves with bodies in a face-up position. There is religious importance in burial patterns. The Woodland Native Americans believed people must make a spiritual journey to reach the afterlife. They could bring tools and supplies that were buried with their bodies. Many tools have been found showing possible jobs in the society. The Native Americans used digging tools found along with baskets to move the earth into mounds. Arrowheads were also discovered showing the

importance of hunting to the people of early Illinois. Possible sources of food include the bison and other large mammals, deer, and small mammals that live in Illinois. About 850 A.D., the Mississippian Native Americans replaced the Woodland Native Americans. The Mississippian people were known as the mound builders because they built most of the mounds that exist today. Mississippian mounds were mainly foundations for temples or the houses of important people. The Mississippians also added to the burial mounds of the Woodland people. One accomplishment of the Mississippians was the organization of politics and society. A high leader and a council of accompanying leaders comprised their government.

Since the building of the mounds, many changes have befallen upon the mounds. When first discovered, residents recognized their difference. The residents knew the mounds were built in layers. Today, farmland has surrounded the site of Dickson Mounds State Park. The town of Lewistown, Illinois, was built near to the site. In the future, it is planned that Dickson Mounds State Park will be renovated in order to educate visitors more efficiently. One possible addition would be the construction of a walk-through mound. In it imitation remains and real artifacts would be in put into the mounds. Visitors could walk into a mound with marked remains and artifacts to explore a potentially interactive exhibit. Another possible change to the museum grounds would be an onsite research center. There, professional archeologists could train students while they are living in dorms on the grounds. These students could help set up audio tours to help those who have troubled eyesight or those who are auditory learners learn about the historical significance of Dickson Mounds. In the Dickson Mounds area, a nature conservancy group is planning a restoration of the land surrounding the park to its

original wetland state to help visitors understand the setting of early Illinois and how it looked when the mounds were built, thus more effectively educating visitors about Illinois' past.

After the War of 1812, the area was given away as a military tract. This is when the Dickson family moved into Illinois. While preparing the land for farming, many residents discovered artifacts. The mounds remained undisturbed until after the Civil War. In the 1860s, William Dickson was clearing trees and brush one day when he unearthed human bones and other artifacts.

After William Dickson's findings, Thomas Dickson disturbed the burial sites while doing work on a house. Thomas Dickson destroyed a section of a burial mound. Because of the findings of his ancestors, Dr. Don Dickson excavated a site of the mounds. In the 1920s, he found bones and artifacts, and researched the culture and life of those found. Dickson recognized the importance of his research and established a museum to educate visitors on ancient Illinoisans. Dickson showcased artifacts as well as remains and the knowledge gained from the mounds. Research has taken place in order to learn about the culture and causes of death of the people. Most people died of diseases such as arthritis, osteomyelitis, rickets, tumors, and pyorrhea. Dickson made a special effort to preserve and exhibit grave offerings and artifacts found to show the burial practices of early Illinoisans. Today, the museum hopes to preserve the remaining mounds. At one time there were over ten thousand mounds in the Illinois River Valley, but only two thousand survive. Through education, Dickson Mounds hopes to end the destruction of mounds, and save Illinois' history. To expand its outreach, Dickson Mounds is utilizing new technologies, such as the Internet, to reach a larger audience.

Through new and developing technologies, the museum's ability to tell stories is protecting the past better.

Dickson Mounds State Park has influenced the history of Illinois, and today it continues to do so. Archeologists at Dickson Mounds are making discoveries that change the way we look at Illinois' past. Bison bones were discovered on the site, making archeologists reconsider when bison first lived in Illinois. An arrowhead found in the body of the bison suggests the diet of Native Americans. Dickson set standards for archeology in his 1920 excavation, which are still in use. Dickson Mounds has helped bring tourism to the area. Dickson Mounds used to bring in 70,000 people annually. Though only 30,000 to 35,000 people come annually now. Dickson Mounds helps bring 100,000 visitors to Lewistown annually. This helps strengthen the economy. Dickson Mounds has also started using multimedia exhibits to help educate efficiently with younger students. In the future, the museum hopes to reinvigorate Don Dickson's legacy for the education of people, young and old.

Due to the founding, excavation, and history of Dickson Mounds State Park, Illinoisans can discover and appreciate the early Native Americans' culture. Through different means of communication, the museum is expanding its outreach. Though much of the information being taught is over 10,000 years in the making, Illinoisans are discovering the impact it has on Illinois today. With ongoing excavations as well as artifacts already found, Dickson Mounds State Park is preserving the history of Illinois. Every day more people learn of Illinois' past, saving it for future generations. [From Alan D. Harn, *The Prehistory of Dickson Mounds*; Lori Rood, *Cahokia Mounds*; Brenda Rothert, "Dickson Mounds Plans Revitalization," *The Peoria Journal Star*, Sept. 3, 2006;

and Carol D. Shull, *The Mound Builders*. National Park Service.

<<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/mounds/builders.htm>>. (Sept. 9, 2006).]